

# THE JOURNEY

FROM UNBELIEF TO FAITH



 **MEN'S**  
NETWORK

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## FROM UNBELIEF TO FAITH

Pat Burke grew up in a troubled home. Her father was an abusive alcoholic, and God was nowhere to be seen. The few Christians she met felt exclusive and unwelcoming to her.

Eddie Balfour spent his childhood in New Orleans. As a Jewish, young man he found discrimination and hatred everywhere he turned—especially from Christians who called him a “Christ-killer,” a title he secretly relished.

Marcia Montenegro’s family moved a lot when she was young. Her desire to learn about religions beyond Christianity led her to astrology and New Age teachings.

Tyler Mann embraced science at an early age. In his mind evolution unseated creation and the need for any god to exist. As Christians tried to witness to him, he took delight in questioning, prodding and attacking their faith.

From their youth these four men and women seemed to be set on lives that would always be separate from God. But in this **Men’s NetWork** study we will watch the Holy Spirit step in and guide them along unexpected paths from antagonism to faith in Jesus Christ.

## FOR THE STUDY LEADER:

### Group Discussion:

- Please feel free to move at your own pace through this study and take as much time as you need for each lesson.
- You are welcome to dig in as deep as you want for your personal study, or you might use just the Bible passages and questions included in the discussion guide.
- If you have a limited time for this session, have the guys take a few minutes to look through the session questions and choose as a group those they would most like to discuss.
- We have designed our questions to be open-ended, thus allowing the men in your group to share their experiences and unique perspectives.

**How to find the Discussion Guide on the DVD:** When you load the DVD into your computer (*not* your DVD player), you can *right click* the menu. If you push “Open” instead of “Play,” you will be able to pull up a list of files. These files include both the discussion guide and our file with the Digging Deeper boxes described.

## USING OUR DIGGING DEEPER BOXES

This is an interactive study guide. We designed it to be flexible, so it will fit both group and personal use. It includes boxes (like the highlighted one below), which provide extra information and links to Internet sites, where you can browse and explore a subject more thoroughly.

We encourage you to look through the Digging Deeper boxes to see which ones your group might want to discuss. On the DVD we have included a Portable Document File (PDF), which has the contents of each Digging Deeper box ready to be printed out. This PDF is also on the **Men’s NetWork** website. You might want to download a copy of this PDF and send it by e-mail to each of the members in your study group. While you may use the paper discussion guide during your group study, you may want to assign homework for those in the study to check out the various Internet resource sites on their own time. It makes the study much more interactive.



## DIGGING DEEPER LINK

Please don't try to look for this [fake link](#). It's here for example only.

Our Digging Deeper boxes link you to websites that provide more information of interest.

### Having difficulty making the web links work?

At the end of this study a full list of web addresses is given. If you don't want to have to type them in, you can download the electronic copy of the discussion guide and then click on the blue hyperlink. Here is a step-by-step guide to find the electronic copy with the working links:

- 1) Log on to [www.lhm.org/men/studies.asp](http://www.lhm.org/men/studies.asp).
- 2) Choose this study from the page by clicking the underlined title (located to the right of the study's graphic).
- 3) On the bottom of this page, click "download videos & materials."
- 4) Enter your e-mail address and password (and register, if necessary).
- 5) Find this study guide, then click the "download now" button.
- 6) In the File Download box, click the "save" button.
- 7) Save it to your desktop.
- 8) Click on the file to open it.

Now you can click the hyperlinks (underlined words or phrases) that interest you and start digging.

**To This Discussion Guide User:** Because of the changing nature of the Internet, occasionally a web link included in a **Men's NetWork** Bible study may change or be deleted altogether by the agency or individual posting it. When you notice an Internet link has been modified or has become inoperable, please report this to the **Men's NetWork**, so we can adjust future editions of this discussion guide. Thank you.

Please send changes to [mensnetwork@lhm.org](mailto:mensnetwork@lhm.org).

## SESSION 1 A SECOND CHANCE

## THE JOURNEY FROM UNBELIEF TO FAITH

**Opening Prayer:** Holy Spirit, You bring men, women and children to faith in Jesus Christ through Your Word and Sacraments. As we see Your handiwork throughout this study, help us more deeply appreciate and rejoice in Your work in us, that we may be Your instruments to guide many others to saving faith. We pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

### WATCH THE VIDEO: SESSION 1

- What impressions did you get from the video?

### The Holy Spirit

In Martin Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, we read, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him."

- Why is it so easy to think of faith in Jesus as something we do by our own strength or decision?

Luther continued, "... but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel ..."

The Bible itself removes all doubt.

### Read 1 Corinthians 12:3b.

<sup>3</sup>... No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

In his *Large Catechism* Luther explains, "Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe on Him, and have Him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel."

- What special comfort comes from knowing your faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, and not a decision you have to reach and maintain?

### A Dark Childhood

Pat Burke said, "My dad ... was the meanest man that I ever knew—that I've ever met to this day. ... You were always on edge; you never knew if he was going to come in and just jerk me out of bed and start knocking me around because he just felt like doing that."

- How do drugs and alcohol affect the physical, verbal and sexual abuse committed by spouses and parents?

- How would you expect such childhood experiences to affect a person's thinking about life and about God?
- How would you respond if an abuse victim or survivor asked you why God didn't step in and stop the abuse?

### **"I Knew How It Felt to Take a Punch."**

When Pat spent time with her husband Roger and his Christian friends, she got frustrated hearing them talk about Bible stories she didn't understand. "It made me really feel *just bad*. So I finally told Rog, 'If you want to go and visit these people, that's fine. But if this is how Christians act I don't want to have anything to do with them; I'm not going anymore.' So I stopped going."

- Describe a time you were in a conversation that went completely over your head.
- Imagine you brought a friend to this Bible study who knows nothing about Christianity. How could you make sure he felt included in your discussion?

In one of those awkward times, Pat listened to a record by a Christian comedian. According to her, she said the comedian said, "'They called Jesus names', and I knew how that felt. And then he really got my attention when he said, 'They spit on Him,' because my dad would spit on me, and I just hated that. And then they went on to describe the beating that He took and how He'd get hit in the face, and I knew how it felt to take a punch, I knew. ... Then the guy doing the record said, 'This is Jesus, and He did all this so that you could have a second chance.'" In that moment the Holy Spirit planted a seed of faith in Pat's soul.

- Why do you think the idea of a "second chance" resonated in Pat's mind?

### **Read Isaiah 53:3-6.**

- <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.
- <sup>4</sup> Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
- <sup>5</sup> But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed.
- <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

- What second chances have you received because of Jesus' suffering and death in your place?
- How does this reading make clear that our second chance isn't to earn God's forgiveness by our actions, but for us sinners to live with God eternally because of Jesus' merits?

- How does this second chance impact our relationships with others?

Just as the Holy Spirit used the Gospel message in a Christian record, He can use a painting, Instagram, greeting card, e-mail, Facebook post, or handwritten note to plant faith in the heart of someone you know.

- What are some objects you can place in your home, work space, or post on the Internet to show your faith and possibly start a faith conversation?

## **Just the Right Time**

When Pat thinks of rushing off to that evening church service, she marvels at God's timing. "It's amazing how God works. If I would have been just three minutes later, they would have been done. People would have been leaving the church. I don't know what would have happened then. But that wasn't the plan. It was my time, and I was there in time."

The Bible talks that way too.

### **Read Romans 5:6.**

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

- Describe a time in your life when God acted at just the right time.

## **Sixty Years of Guilt**

Shortly before her death, Pat's mother confided the incredible burden of guilt she carried over the abortion she'd had 60 years before. "She had never told anyone, and that's why she thought she could never be forgiven for that. But once again it was God's plan that I would have to work my way through something like that with my oldest daughter who'd had an abortion, and someone told me how I could get over the grief. So I was able to walk my mother through that."

### **Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.**

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,

<sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

- Describe a situation where you received comfort from another Christian, and then were able to pass it on to someone else passing through a similar situation.

**Closing Prayer:** Spirit of God, thank You for leading Pat to faith, and touching so many people through her new life. Make me aware of the great salvation won by my Lord Jesus Christ so that I may share Your comfort with those who are struggling around me. I pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

## DIGGING DEEPER LINKS

### For Abused and Neglected Children:

#### ["Validation That Someone Cares"](#)

"Over the years, our experience has shown us, and we deeply believe, that no child can be truly healed unless he is cared for emotionally, physically, and spiritually."

#### [Preventing Child Abuse in Our Congregation](#)

"'What about the Children' in the August issue reminded me that a few years ago one of our congregation members, Baker Kittelson, in cooperation with director of Christian Education, Bob Brantsch, was instrumental in forming a Prevention of Abuse of Children (PAC) Committee, which resulted in a policy manual for our congregation."

- [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#): 1-800-799-7233
- [Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline](#): 1-800-4-A-Child (1-800-422-4453)
- Dating Abuse Help: [Love Is Respect](#)

### Project Connect Booklets:

*Has God Abandoned Me?*

#### **For Women Facing Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence has no boundaries, and it does not care about social standing, age, ethnicity or religion. It traps its victims in a very lonely and frightening prison. This booklet is designed to answer questions and help you understand the cycle of violence, develop a plan for the future, and know that God will never forsake an abused woman.

[Download this PDF](#)

[Download this MP3 Audio File](#)

*Overcoming a Painful Childhood*

#### **Hope and Healing for Adult Survivors of Abuse and Neglect**

This booklet is for the millions of men and women, whose lives are affected by abuse or neglect as a child, adult survivors of physical, emotional and spiritual abuse. Recovering from a painful childhood is a slow process—and you need not do it alone. With help from God and people who care, you can learn how to cope with abuse, how to care for your particular needs as a survivor, and how to build a better future.

[Download this PDF](#)

#### [Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Resources:](#)

To assist church workers and lay members with responding to known or suspected instances of domestic violence, free resources are now available on the LCMS website about domestic abuse, and more materials are being developed on a range of social issues. The domestic-abuse resources are meant to aid church workers, friends, family members, and survivors of domestic abuse in identifying and understanding the issue, and information is provided on how to intervene when such a situation is discovered.

### **Making Your Church More User-Friendly**

#### [Strangers in the Pews](#)

You can help visitors to your congregation feel welcome. Here are some practical thoughts to keep in mind.

## SESSION 2 DEAD IS DEAD

## THE JOURNEY FROM UNBELIEF TO FAITH

**Opening Prayer:** Spirit of the living God, You created faith in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and taught their descendants through Moses and the prophets. Open the hearts of every Jew to know Jesus as his or her Messiah and Savior. In Jesus' Name I pray this. Amen.

### WATCH THE VIDEO: SESSION 2

- What jumped out at you in the video?

### "Christ-Killers!"

On the streets of New Orleans, Eddie Balfour experienced strong anti-Jewish sentiment. "Imagine walking to school every day and having an organized group of young children standing on the corner where the police lady is taking you across the street, yelling at the top of their lungs, 'Christ-killer! Christ-killer! You killed Jesus Christ!' I don't even know if these children knew what they were screaming, but it was certainly intimidating to Jewish children."

- What role do you think Christian parents had in this anti-Jewish behavior of their children?
- What anti-Jewish sentiments have you detected in your circles?

The Jewish children who suffered this discrimination banded together in hatred of the Christians. Eddie said, "In private, they (Jews) were very proud to believe that they had killed Jesus Christ. The only problem that Jews had with being 'Christ-killers' is they believe that they helped promote Christianity as a religion. They made Jesus a martyr. And this was nothing but a renegade rabbi who had gotten full of Himself."

Paul asks an important question—what does God think about Jewish people?

### Read Romans 11:1-5.

- <sup>1</sup> "I ask, then, has God rejected His people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.
- <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?
- <sup>3</sup> "Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have demolished Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life."
- <sup>4</sup> But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."
- <sup>5</sup> So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

- How do Jesus' words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34a) remind us of God's desire to save Jewish people through faith in Jesus?



- How did the Christian children's treatment of Eddie and the other Jewish children frustrate God's plan to save them?
- Describe what it might have been like for Eddie and his Jewish friends if Christian parents had shared God's continuing love for the Jews, and taught their children the same?

### **"Dead Is Dead."**

Eddie's journey was deeply influenced by the death of his beloved uncle. The lingering pain of his grief is evident to this day. The Jewish way of dealing with death left Eddie in total dismay. "Jews have a phrase, a standard phrase, 'Dead is dead.' But I decided to go to my rabbi anyhow, tried to find some solace and tried to find some assurance that my uncle hadn't disappeared. And Rabbi Goldberg said, 'Oh, you know that dead is dead,' and that was about it."

"Dead is dead" is the Jewish way of speaking to children about the earthly permanence of death. After all, children know a "dead" cell phone can "come alive" again if it is recharged. So they may have the idea a loved one will come alive again in the same way. Telling Eddie "dead is dead" was the rabbi's way of telling him not to expect to see his uncle in this life again.

- Why do you think this answer drove Eddie to look outside the synagogue?
- What struggles did you face when you tried to come to grips with the death of your loved ones?

King David had an infant son who was gravely ill. While he was fasting and praying, he learned his child had died, David gave a beautiful profession of faith. While leaving it clear that "dead is dead," he demonstrated his God-given faith in life after death.

### **Read 2 Samuel 12:22-23.**

<sup>22</sup> He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'

<sup>23</sup> But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

### **Missed Opportunities**

The rabbi's response to Eddie's question was the start of his path to Christ. "That led me to go really on a very long journey starting off in Roman Catholic churches by making appointments or just showing up at the rectories of Roman Catholic priests, asking them the same thing, 'Well, what do you believe?' (They answered), 'Well, where do you go to church?' I'd say, 'I don't go to church, I'm Jewish.' 'Well, go back to your rabbi. What are you doing here?' I think back and I go, boy, what an opportunity for evangelism that was missed."

- If Eddie had come up to you at that moment, what would you have told him?

- What are some reasons Christians miss golden opportunities for evangelism?
- Describe an opportunity you missed in the past.
- What can we do to better recognize opportunities God gives us?

Eddie went on to St. Paul's Episcopal Church. "I was going to be there myself in a quiet, meditative place that sometimes I listened to the sermons, which were very moralistic, very ethical to me, so I was very comfortable in that church. ... I literally went every Sunday for two years without anybody even approaching me."

- What opportunities were missed here?
- How easily could that happen in your church?
- How can you and your congregational be more intentional in looking for visitors and not letting them slip through the cracks unnoticed?

Odd as it may seem, it may have been for the best that no one approached Eddie. He believes he would have resented the approach and run the other way. But many people aren't like that. They won't go back to a church where no one cares enough to approach them or acknowledge they are there.

- How do you personally feel when you visit a different church? Do you want to be approached?
- How can you get a sense when a visitor doesn't want to be approached and when he or she would like to speak with someone?

Eddie said, "It wasn't because anybody tried to evangelize to me. That would have been offensive to me. I probably would have run the other way. But little by little, when people say, 'Who converted you?' I would say it's by the power of the Holy Spirit." Even though no individual was approaching Eddie, the Holy Spirit was approaching and talking to him through the service, hymns, readings and the sermons he heard.

**Read Isaiah 55:10-11.**

- <sup>10</sup> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
<sup>11</sup> so shall My Word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

## The Crucifix

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block to a Jew is the crucifix with the image of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross.

### Read 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.

<sup>23</sup> We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

<sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

As the Spirit worked through the Gospel Eddie heard each week in church, his view of the cross changed. "The crucifix started meaning an awful lot to me. Instead of being proud of the fact that there was Jesus on the cross, as time went on I learned to be ashamed and felt guilt about it."

- What symbols have that strong a meaning for you?

For Eddie the crucifix meant the power and wisdom of God, but for his family it definitely proved to be a stumbling block. "When I bought my crucifix I went home, and the first person I ran into was my older brother. His words were, 'You're not going to do that here. You're not going to bring that into our house.' He beat the hell out of me. He still doesn't talk to me."

After his brother beat him up, Eddie left home and never went back. In fact, his parents didn't even talk to him until after Eddie's first child was born; then a kind of relationship opened up.

That crucifix also proved a stumbling block to other Jews—and even to Christians who still harbored anti-Jewish feelings. "Living got hard, but I knew if I wore it in the places I went where there were Jews, or even if there were Christians who thought I was pretending to be a Christian, I was going to be in trouble in New Orleans. And I was. I was constantly confronted."

Like the apostle Paul, Eddie faced suspicion from Christians and hostility from Jews. "There are Christians that, no matter what you say, they don't want a Jew preaching to them."

- How would you feel if Eddie Balfour came into church and stepped into your pulpit next weekend? How do you think your congregation would respond?
- Describe the unconventional people who might receive a cold reaction if they showed up in your church?
- What can you do to confront this less-than-Christ-like reaction in yourself and in your congregation?

**Closing Prayer:** Holy Spirit, You bring men, women and children to faith along strange and unexpected paths. Give me a genuine love and concern for every person You bring into my life so that I may share Christ's love in my attitudes, words and deeds. Please do this as You work through the Gospel to bring many to faith. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

### Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Ministries to Jews:

#### [The Apple of His Eye Mission Society](#)

[Chai v'Shalom](#) This Lutheran ministry shares the Gospel with Jews.

#### [Jews for Jesus](#)

### Jewish Thoughts on "Dead Is Dead."

#### [How to Help Children of Different Ages Cope with a Death](#)

This article demonstrates the Jewish thinking behind "dead is dead," as Rabbi Earl Grollman advises parents how to help children of different ages deal with death.

### Project Connect Booklets about Grief:

#### *Take Heart in Your Grief*

This booklet explores the common feelings people have during a grieving period when a loved one dies. Thankfully, not even death can stop God's love from reaching out to us.

#### [Download this PDF](#)

#### *What Happens When I Die?*

In this booklet human death—and what Scripture says about the end of our lives—is explained to Christians and non-Christians alike. Examining biblical passages dealing with the "body," "soul," "heaven," "hell" and other topics, this booklet considers these and other difficult questions about death.

#### [Download this PDF](#)

#### [Download MP3 Audio File](#)

### The Crucifix

#### Lutheran Hour Questions and Answers:

##### [What is the Difference between a Cross and a Crucifix?](#)

A listener asks, "Recently, I saw a picture of Pastor Klaus and he was wearing a crucifix. If I remember back to my confirmation days, the pastor said that Lutherans don't wear a crucifix. They also don't put a crucifix on their altar. To use a crucifix is telling people that Jesus is still on the cross; or is still suffering for our sins. I wasn't offended, but I thought I would ask."

#### [Cross and Church](#)

Rev. Dr. Scott R. Murray writes, "The Lord's cross must dominate the Church, for the cross shapes the entire life of God's people by marking the presence of the Gospel. Cross and Church are inseparable."

#### Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: [Is the Use of Crucifixes a Roman Catholic Practice?](#) Doesn't the empty cross provide a better symbol for Lutherans? How does the LCMS feel about using a crucifix in church?



## SESSION 3 BURIED WITH BUDDHA

## THE JOURNEY FROM UNBELIEF TO FAITH

**Opening Prayer:** Holy Spirit, our world is flooded with deceptive spiritual ideas that are easily accessible, especially on the Internet. Help us understand the lure of New Age mysticism so that we may know how to share the Gospel most effectively. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

### WATCH THE VIDEO: SESSION 3

- What observations do you have from the video?

### Spiritual Friends

Marcia Montenegro said she became serious about religion when she was in junior high. "I wanted to know about other religions. And I had friends in high school who were from other religions, and that got me to thinking that ... I could explore other faiths."

- When you were high-school age, how serious were you about spiritual matters?
- What kinds of life experiences can lead a person to get serious about spirituality?

In a part of her interview that didn't make it to the final video, Marcia said she became disillusioned with Christians in high school. But she was impressed by the spirituality of friends who were Baha'i, Mormon, and Quaker.

- What are some reasons she may have become disillusioned by the Christians in school?
- In what ways does it harm our witness when we compromise the holy life God calls us to live and end up blending in with everyone else?
- How can we try to live godly lives without alienating unbelievers we know?

Marcia wrote, "I started reading more about Hinduism, reincarnation, contact with the dead, especially. I had always had an interest in astrology. And I continued on reading these kinds of materials and just getting more deeply drawn into it and actually my worldview began shifting."

- How much influence do you think the materials we watch and read have on our faith and our worldview?
- How can we minimize their influence while learning how to share our faith with people who hold these ideas?

### **Experience Validates Belief**

Marcia studied the teachings of long-dead gurus. Her experiences seemed to confirm that their writings were truthful. "I did think that truth came from your experiences, and my experiences were validating the things that I believed. And I believed that those things were being shown to me as truth through these experiences, so I felt that I really was on a spiritual path towards understanding what true reality was."

- How do you determine what is true or real?
- What is the problem with seeking truth from inside ourselves—from our subjective feelings and experiences?
- Describe situations in which it's essential to rely on external sources of authority, like the Bible, rather than on our feelings?

### **Read Proverbs 14:12.**

<sup>12</sup> There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

### **An Undeniable Compulsion**

Marcia had rejected Christianity, yet she felt herself being pushed hard toward it. "I started getting a compulsion to go to a church ... I didn't know why I was having this compulsion, and I didn't like it. I just had this hatred for Christianity and what I thought Christianity was. This compulsion didn't go away, and I finally decided that I would go to a church because I thought I would get it out of my system."

At first, Marcia attributed this compulsion to reincarnation, thinking one of her earlier incarnations had been as a Christian.

- Since God completely denies reincarnation (see Hebrews 9:27), how else would you explain this compulsion?
- Have you ever gotten a compulsion that you thought was from God? Describe it.

Marcia was amazed to learn others were praying for her. "I found out at this part-time job I had that a young Christian man there had been praying for me with his fellowship group at his church all during the year all of these things happened that led me to the church and to reading the Bible."

- What part might their prayers for Marcia have played in the compulsion she felt to go to church?

Finally, she yielded to the compulsion and had an unforgettable experience, "At the beginning of the service ... they had a processional coming from the back of the church down the aisle. And at the head of this procession was a young boy carrying a cross. And as he walked by me this very unexpected thing happened to me. I felt this incredible love coming down on me ... and it was falling on me from above. It was not from the people or the music, it was not from me. I knew it was coming from a personal God who was telling me He loved me."

- What thoughts arose in your mind when she described this procession in the video?
- Has anyone ever told you they have seen Jesus or angels? What did you say, or what would you say if someone told you today?

King Saul experienced something similar. After turning his back on God, he was rejected as king and God chose David to be his successor. In murderous jealousy, Saul was on his way to kill David when the Holy Spirit stepped in.

### **Read 1 Samuel 19:18-24.**

- <sup>18</sup> Now David fled and escaped, and he came to Samuel at Ramah and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went and lived at Naioth.
- <sup>19</sup> And it was told Saul, "Behold, David is at Naioth in Ramah."
- <sup>20</sup> Then Saul sent messengers to take David, and when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as head over them, the Spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied.
- <sup>21</sup> When it was told Saul, he sent other messengers, and they also prophesied. And Saul sent other messengers again the third time, and they also prophesied.
- <sup>22</sup> Then he himself went to Ramah and came to the great well that is in Secu. And he asked, "Where are Samuel and David?" And one said, "Behold, they are at Naioth in Ramah."
- <sup>23</sup> And he went there to Naioth in Ramah. And the Spirit of God came upon him also, and as he went he prophesied until he came to Naioth in Ramah.
- <sup>24</sup> And he too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

The Holy Spirit brought Saul and his men under a spiritual trance, even to the point that Saul stripped off his royal robes. But sadly, unlike Marcia, Saul didn't change his life and return to God in repentance and faith. He continued his self-destructive course against God and David until the bitter end.

### **Astrology**

People have consulted astrologers for thousands of years. Astrologers study the placement of stars and planets to predict future events. God forbade His nation of Israel to practice astrology, and taunted the Babylonians who relied on the predictions of astrologers to escape calamity.

### **Read Isaiah 47:12-14.**

- <sup>12</sup> Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries, with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you may be able to succeed; perhaps you may inspire terror.
- <sup>13</sup> You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you.
- <sup>14</sup> Behold, they are like stubble; the fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this, no fire to sit before!

Like Marcia, the wise men in the Christmas story were trained astrologers. Though God forbade His Old Testament people from practicing it, He still loved these astrologers and gave them a special star to guide them on a journey to find the Christ Child.

**Read Mathew 2:1-2, 4-6, 9-10.**

- <sup>1</sup> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,
- <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him."
- <sup>4</sup> And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.
- <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:
- <sup>6</sup> 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.'"
- <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.
- <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star; they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Like Marcia beholding the passing cross, the wise men experienced powerful emotions when they saw the star after leaving Herod's palace. But for them the star was not the most important thing; rather, it was God's Word and God's Son to which the star led them.

Likewise, God may have used the processional cross to start Marcia down a different path, but it was her study of His Word in Matthew through which the Holy Spirit brought her to faith in Jesus.

She says, "So then on December 21 I was in Matthew chapter 8 and I was reading an account of Jesus on the boat with His disciples, and the storm comes and the disciples were scared and they wake Jesus up, and He rebukes the sea and the wind, and the sea and the wind obey Him immediately. And the disciples are amazed and say 'What kind of man is this that even the sea and winds obey Him?' And this particular account just captivated me and I kept reading it over and over again because there was something in it that was different. And as I was rereading it I realized that it was Jesus Christ that was real and I saw who Jesus really was. For the first time I understood. It was like God opened my eyes and I saw Jesus as the Savior and that He really had died on the cross for me."

Wicca and paganism strive to harness the power of nature and guide it for one's purposes through spells and incantations.

- How would the account of Jesus stilling the storms by His simple words have a tremendous impact on someone interested in spells and incantations?



## Buried with Buddha

After coming to Christ, Marcia came to a stunning conclusion, “I realized that I had been in a grave spiritually with Buddha, with all of these enlightened masters and teachers that I thought had so much spiritual wisdom. And all of these people, of course, were dead and buried and I had kind of spiritually been in the grave with them.”

- What is the irony of seeking wisdom from spiritual leaders who lay long dead in their graves?
- How does Jesus’ empty tomb reinforce His authority as the great Teacher of true spirituality?

**Closing Prayer:** Holy Spirit, thank You for leading me to faith. Bless Marcia and all those who reach out to people living in the darkness of astrology and New Age teachings. Work through us to call many from darkness to Your spiritual light. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## DIGGING DEEPER LINKS

### What Happens to Christians Who Leave the Church?

#### [‘Ex-Christians’: Gone for Good?](#)

This is a Q&A with Drew Dyck, author of *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults are Leaving the Faith... and How to Bring Them Back*.

### Astrology and the Bible

#### [“The New Quest for the Sacred: The Witchcraft Craze and the Lure of the Occult”](#)

In this article by Ralph L. Moellering, the author writes how many people are searching for something higher, more spiritual, in an age of scientific reason, which often says there is no need for God to exist.

#### [The Religious Movements Page](#)

This page offers profiles of many religious movements.

#### [Christ and the Challenge of Neo-Paganism](#)

Christ in a pagan world is not about the past. It is about a very real present. This is true because our culture is filled with cults, the occult, neo-paganism, Wicca, the New Age Movement, etc.

#### [“The Quest for Experiencing the Divine: The Rise and Effect of Eastern Religions”](#)

In this article, Dr. Naomichi Masaki notes that while the joy in the forgiveness of our sins remains firm because of the Lord’s gifts in Baptism, the world into which we are placed each day is ever changing. As mainline churches continue to decline in membership “spirituality”—the impulse to seek communion with the Divine—is thriving.

#### [“The Visit of the Magi: Fact or Fiction?”](#)

In this article Dr. Paul L. Maier writes, “For years, biblical critics have questioned many details in the Christmas Gospels, such as the Annunciation, the Roman census, the Virgin Birth, the angelic announcement to the shepherds, and the infant massacre at Bethlehem. While secular evidence from the ancient world actually supports many aspects of the Nativity, one objection is quite formidable. It involves the Magi ....”

## SESSION 4

# XBOX ATHIEST

## THE JOURNEY

FROM UNBELIEF TO FAITH

**Opening Prayer:** Holy Spirit, thank You for other Christians who shared Your Word with me, the Word through which You brought me to faith. Open my eyes to all the possibilities there are to pass on this faith through social media, the Internet, cell phones, texts, e-mails, and even online gaming. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

### WATCH THE VIDEO: SESSION 4

- What did you see in the video that meant the most to you?

### Parental Influence

Did you notice a similarity between the parents of the four people in our study?

**Pat Burke** said, "My parents never spoke of God, never spoke of Jesus. We never went to church."

**Eddie Balfour's** parents were Orthodox Jews who regularly went to synagogue.

**Marcia Montenegro** said, "My father was an agnostic and did not believe in the supernatural, did not believe that we could know there was a God."

**Tyler Mann** said, "(My dad) had a spiritual background but didn't go to church of any form."

- Why do you think parents, especially fathers, are so influential in their children's spirituality?
- Describe your father's influence on your spiritual development.
- What can we do to be strong spiritual leaders for our families?

When considering the influence of a father on his children in respect to church attendance, here are some interesting statistics from a study by Werner Haug and Phillipe Warner based on religious groups in Switzerland.\*

1. When mother and father attend church regularly,
  - 33 percent of their children will end up attending church regularly;
  - 25 percent of their children will end up not attending at all.
2. When mother attends church regularly and father does not attend church at all,
  - 2 percent of their children will end up attending church regularly;
  - 60 percent of their children will end up not attending at all.

3. When father attends church regularly but mother does not attend church at all,
- 44 percent of their children will end up attending church regularly;
  - 34 percent of their children will end up not attending at all.

Look at the difference between situations two and three. Fathers are truly the spiritual leaders and the numbers prove it. However, more and more men are staying away from church because they think church is for women.

- What can you as a church do to keep and reclaim fathers in regular worship?

At the beginning of the video, Tyler said his dad “had a spiritual background but didn’t go to church of any form.” But evidently over the years his dad became a strong Christian. When he lost his job two days before Christmas in 2009, he saw Tyler’s shocked face and told him, “Don’t worry. God will open another door.”

- Why did that demonstration of faith have such a huge impact on Tyler and his journey?
- Describe the impact you felt when you watched another Christian face a difficult struggle with God’s grace and peace.
- Why should we never underestimate the impact our faith makes when others (especially our children) watch us go through difficult challenges in life?
- If you were not a strong Christian influence in your children’s early years, what are some good ways to influence them now when they are older?

## **No Need for God to Exist**

Tyler told us, “Growing up without any kind of God or any religion of any form, I basically went out and sought my own and found science. With this science and evolution I personally felt that there was no need for a God to exist, and this became the truth for me and for my beliefs.”

- Where have you encountered this kind of thinking?
- What can you say to someone who thinks this way?
- What are some pitfalls to avoid?

Paul reminds us that God’s creation offers a strong reminder of His existence.

## Read Romans 1:18-20.

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

<sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

<sup>20</sup> For His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

- How does evolution enable people to deny their Creator?
- When sharing your faith, when might it be appropriate to debate evolution and when might it be better to avoid the topic altogether?

## "I Knew More about the Bible Than They Did."

Many Christians tried to witness to Tyler. "I often times found I knew more about the Bible than they did. ... They'd quote ten verses to me and I could quote 15 more back that they didn't know even existed in the Bible that I seemed to know by Googling and just doing quick searches of basically other atheists."

- How should you respond to such questions if you don't know the answer that very moment?
- Why is it important to take the time and effort to learn the arguments atheists are using against Bible passages?

Speaking of a Christian pastor who used the Law to show his need for a Savior, Tyler said, "To me he was just another hypocrite trying to force his beliefs on someone else."

- What do atheists see that make Christians appear to be hypocrites?
- Name some of the behaviors we need to reexamine in our lives.
- How much weight should we give to reactions like Tyler's when we consider how to witness to them?

Tyler said, "Much of what I held against Christianity and religion was all the people that I saw. ... It finally came to me, that wasn't who God was. That's who the people that followed God may have been, but why was I holding the people against God, as if God couldn't exist just because there are people who twisted what He said or some hypocrites among them?"

- How can we use this insight when we speak to people who reject Jesus Christ because of the hypocrisy they see in Christians?



Tyler described his conversations with a Christian leader, "I was constantly challenging him, asking questions, pushing him ... (he) didn't take any offense to what I was doing—just gave me more information, tried to help me to continue to learn and continue those conversations, and continue to relate to me and try to explain the material to me in a way that I would understand it."

- How do you think you would respond if an atheist was that aggressive with you?
- Why is it important to keep your mind focused on the other person's spiritual needs and not on your own offended feelings?
- How did it affect Tyler when the leader stayed calm and treated him respectfully?
- Why is it valuable to remember it is up to the Holy Spirit to create faith in someone else, and not up to us?

### **What Is Your Passion?**

The Holy Spirit reached Tyler through his passion for gaming, especially through a Christian whose gamer tag was "Risen." Tyler described him in these words, "He was a good guy, a good player, hard worker, loved playing with him."

- What passions did you have when you were his age? What are your passions today?

Some people might question why a Christian would pour so much time, effort and expense into gaming or another passion (travel, golf, RV travel, fishing, historical reenactment, etc.), which seems so self-indulgent.

- What is the difference in how you approach something you are truly passionate about compared to something that only mildly interests you?
- Describe what it is like to be with a community of people who share your passion.
- Discuss some ways you can follow Risen's example and use your particular passion as a vehicle to share your faith with others who share that passion.

**Closing Prayer:** Holy Spirit, thank You for the unexpected path by which You guided me to my Savior Jesus Christ. Prepare me to be Your instrument to lead others to Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Savior. I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

### Christian Gaming Site:

#### [Gaming By Grace](#)

Here's the organization's mission statement: "Gaming by Grace is a dynamic and excited group of online gamers who desire to have a good time playing the games we play! We look for other gamers who exhibit mature, respectful attributes and encourage them to be part of the world of mature game play. We desire that all members, Christian or not, experience the fun and enjoyment of the game. We always say "Good Game!" to those we face, win or lose."

### Hobbies and Passions

#### [The Gospel on Their Shoulders](#)

The appeal of miniature donkeys—not least the legend of how a cross came to adorn their backs—has provided an entrée for an Indiana couple to share the faith.

#### [What I Learned Helping My Daughter Find a Passion](#)

This father pushed his daughter toward the tremendous athletic skill he saw in his daughter. But the performing arts were her real passion.

### Answers to Biblical Arguments from Atheists:

#### Project Connect Booklet:

##### *Reasons to Believe*

Written to illustrate the reasonableness of the Christian faith, this booklet is ideal as a quick, go-to guide on how Christianity makes sense on many levels. In an easy-to-read style, it shows how believing in God, creation, prophecy, man's inner morality, Jesus and salvation is not something far-fetched and out there. On the contrary, based on historical and archaeological evidence, faith in the truthfulness of God's Word is a logical response to the material at our disposal.

[Download this PDF](#)

[Download MP3 Audio File](#)

\*Haug, Werner and Phillip Warner (2000). The Demographic Characteristics of the Linguistic and Religious Groups in Switzerland. Population Studies No. 31 in volume two of *The Demographic Characteristics of National Minorities in Certain European States*, published by the Council of Europe Directorate General III, Social Cohesion, Strasbourg, France.

## FULL LIST OF DIGGING DEEPER LINKS

### SESSION 1: A SECOND CHANCE

#### For Abused and Neglected Children: "Validation that Someone Cares"

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2009/for-abused-and-neglected-children-validation-that-someone-cares-5-2009>

#### Preventing Child Abuse in Our Congregation

[http://gloriadeihudson.org/documents/PAC\\_Policy\\_Manual.pdf](http://gloriadeihudson.org/documents/PAC_Policy_Manual.pdf)

- [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)
- [www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)
- [www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org)

#### Project Connect Booklets:

*Has God Abandoned Me?*

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=3113>

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=4878>

*Overcoming a Painful Childhood*

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=3082>

#### Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Resources:

<http://www.lcms.org/socialissues/domesticviolence?srctid=1&erid=7019104&trid=870e96b0-13c6-4412-b59c-d6e802a154a5>

#### Making Your Church More User-Friendly

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2007/strangers-in-the-pews-3-2007>

### SESSION 2: DEAD IS DEAD

#### Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Ministries to Jews:

<http://aohe-mo.org/>

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2014/ministry-seeks-to-convert-jews>

<http://jewsforjesus.org/>

#### Jewish Thoughts on "Dead Is Dead."

<http://www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=939>

#### Project Connect Booklets about Grief:

*Take Heart in Your Grief*

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=3088>

*What Happens When I Die?*

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=3261>

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=4501>

#### The Crucifix

The Lutheran Hour Questions and Answers:

<http://media.lhm.org/lutheranhour/mp3s/QA7517PD.mp3>

Cross and Church

<http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/CrossandChurchMurray.pdf>

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Frequently Asked Questions:

<http://www.lcms.org/faqs/worship#crucifixes>

### SESSION 3: BURIED WITH BUDDHA

#### What Happens to Christians Who Leave the Church?

"Ex-Christians": Gone for Good?

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2011/ex-christians-gone-for-good>

#### Astrology and the Bible

"The New Quest for the Sacred: The Witchcraft Craze and the Lure of the Occult"

<http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/moelleringthenewquestforthesacred.pdf>

The Religious Movements Page

<http://web.archive.org/web/20060902232910/http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/profiles/listalpha.htm>

Christ and the Challenge of Neo-Paganism

<http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/ChristandtheChallengeofNeoPaganismNichols.pdf>

"The Quest for Experiencing the Divine: The Rise and Effect of Eastern Religions"

<http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/TheQuestforExperiencingtheDivingMasaki.pdf>

"The Visit of the Magi: Fact or Fiction?"

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2010/the-visit-of-the-magi-fact-or-fiction-12-2010>

### SESSION 4: XBOX ATHEIST

#### Christian Gaming Site:

Gaming By Grace

<http://www.gamingbygrace.com/>

#### Hobbies and Passions

The Gospel on Their Shoulders

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2008/the-gospel-on-their-shoulders-8-2008>

What I Learned Helping my Daughter Find a Passion

[http://allprodad.com/what-i-learned-helping-my-daughter-find-a-passion/?utm\\_term=playoftheday&utm\\_campaign=Play+of+the+Day+Daily+Email&utm\\_source=hs\\_email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=16834631&\\_hsenc=p2ANqtz-96mBUhkytZ5WXn5NG-80CJJ1Y7vOK3m4gT3Yb65orMFtEkkfRp6nFKwxpolr3asbqPIYsgT48R\\_XfOluoRvnFquLlJTw&\\_hsmi=16834631](http://allprodad.com/what-i-learned-helping-my-daughter-find-a-passion/?utm_term=playoftheday&utm_campaign=Play+of+the+Day+Daily+Email&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=16834631&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-96mBUhkytZ5WXn5NG-80CJJ1Y7vOK3m4gT3Yb65orMFtEkkfRp6nFKwxpolr3asbqPIYsgT48R_XfOluoRvnFquLlJTw&_hsmi=16834631)

#### Answers to Biblical Arguments from Atheists:

Project Connect Booklet:

*Reasons to Believe*

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=3845>

<http://www.lhm.org/projectconnect/downloadfile.asp?ID=4872>

## ABOUT THE HOST

The **Rev. Dr. John Nunes** serves on the faculty at Valparaiso University as The Emil and Elfriede Jochum Professor and Chair, a professorship established to support the study of Christian values in public and professional life.

Nunes previously served from 2007 until 2013 as president and CEO of Lutheran World Relief (LWR), a \$49 million global organization working to end poverty, injustice and human suffering worldwide. He has also been a professor of theology at Concordia University Chicago, a management consultant, and an urban parish pastor and community organizer in Dallas and Detroit.

A gifted public speaker, he has spoken at a number of LHM events. Most recently, he presented at an LHM Outreach Conference, SENT, held in Detroit, Michigan. He is a frequent keynote speaker who has also published several works.

Nunes has written *Voices from the City: Issues and Images of Urban Preaching* and, with his wife, Monique, the children's book, *Little Things Make Big Differences: A Story about Malaria*.

## CARE TO SHARE YOUR COMMENTS ABOUT OUR STUDY?

**Men's NetWork Leader Survey:** <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/Q2YGKG6>

**Men's NetWork Participant Survey:** <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SDMD9VW>

The **Men's NetWork** is a Christ-centered, Scripture-guided, service-oriented fellowship committed to equipping and motivating men to greater levels of leadership and service as they become stronger disciples of Jesus Christ. Our website, **WWW.LHM.ORG/MEN**, offers video Bible studies, ministry tools to deepen men's faith, practical and easy-to-use resources for hands-on service projects, and other useful information for men's groups.



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